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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: A RECIPE FOR STALEMATE: THE INHERENT WEAKNESSES OF  
LEBANON'S CONFESSIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEM

REF: A. BEIRUT 1005  
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 850

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) As Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri returns to his task of forming a government, many Lebanese are asking themselves whether any resulting cabinet will be truly able to address Lebanon's many challenges. Both sides of the political divide agree that the current political system precludes creation of a truly effective, stable government. Lebanon's confessional political system prevents excluding any one group from power, which has contributed directly to the deadlock. Hizballah continues to seek a veto on government decisions, and the opposition it leads has now made a strategic decision to link cabinet formation to "restructuring" the political balance, a demand the March 14 majority rejects. End summary.

HARIRI: I HAVE CONSTITUTIONAL PREROGATIVES

[1](#)2. (C) In the wake of Saad Hariri's resignation as prime minister-designate on September 10 (ref A), observers have suggested a variety of alternatives to the previously agreed-upon 15-10-5 national unity cabinet formula (15 ministers for the majority, ten for the opposition, and five for the president). After being reappointed as PM-designate on September 16, Hariri reasserted his constitutional prerogatives and his political right as leader of the parliamentary majority to form a unity government without prior approval from the opposition. The opposition, in contrast, is continuing to call for a national unity government that offers them a veto on all major decisions and the right to name their own ministers in such a government. Hariri may use new negotiating tactics the second time but the question remains: does the Lebanese political system allow the majority to overrule the demands of a strident minority?

THE CONSTITUTION VERSUS  
DEMOGRAPHICS -- AND ARMS

13. (C) On both sides of the political divide, all but the most partisan agree that no effective, stable government can crystallize without a renegotiation of the political rules of the game. Although most politicians half-heartedly call for the full implementation of the 1989 Ta'if Accord that ended the civil war, they also admit that the accord is a flawed tool engineered by Syria to control Lebanon through its proxies. The accord, which was never fully implemented, called for movement toward a non-confessional system and in the meantime realigned the power-sharing agreement between the Christians and the Muslims to establish a 50/50 balance in the parliament (instead of the former 60/40 in the Christians' favor), with the Sunnis, the Shia, the Druze and the Alawites dividing the Muslim share. The cabinet was also equally divided between Christians and Muslims. In the new system, a strong Sunni prime minister supplanted the formerly all-powerful Christian president, the Shia obtained the presidency of the parliament, and the Druze would have the presidency of the senate at such time as one is created.

14. (C) Since 1989, demographics have continued to shift, to the detriment of the Christians and the benefit of the Shia. No census has been taken in Lebanon since the one conducted by the French in 1932, which showed Christians with 55% of the population, a figure that has shrunk to a current estimated maximum of 35% -- a reflection of the effects of war, migration, and higher birth rates among Muslims. Sunni population figures are estimated to be around 25%, and the Shia are now estimated at a minimum 30% of the population and growing rapidly. Although Christians feel assailed by shrinking numbers and Islamic fundamentalism, the Shia -- empowered by Hizballah's arms and demographics -- are demanding a larger share of the pie.

THE SHIA SEEK INFLUENCE  
OUTSIDE THE CONSTITUTION  
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15. (C) The sense among the Shia that the system has neglected them and refuses to recognize their growing power has opened space for Hizballah. Hizballah provides extensive social services to its constituents, but its weapons are what gives it clout. Even though Ta'if called for the disarming of all militias, Hizballah was allowed to keep its arms as a "resistance" force against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. Hizballah has expanded its military capabilities with Syrian and Iranian assistance following its 2006 war with Israel, and turned those weapons inward for the first time in May 2008 when it crushed competing militias and took over parts of Beirut and the Chouf region. On the heels of its takeover, Hizballah demanded and obtained a blocking vote on key cabinet decisions as part of the Doha Agreement that defused the crisis. That arrangement lasted until the June 2009 elections, though Hizballah has made clear its desire to make it permanent. While Hizballah cannot modify the constitution on its own, it can prevent the other players from making any moves contrary to its interests.

AOUN SEEKS TO OFFER THE SHIA VICTORY  
FROM WITHIN THE SYSTEM  
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16. (C) Hizballah forged a strategic alli^Q[kayeNz'QQanon -- Hizballah -- and seeking to disarm it peacefully through assimilation. In addition to providing a cross-confessional coalition, Aoun offers Hizballah nearly 50% of the Christian vote. Had Aoun succeeded in winning a few key districts in June's elections, his Shia allies would have controlled a parliamentary majority. Denied victory, the opposition is now pushing hard for the majority to make accommodations. Each time Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah points out that the March 8 opposition bloc won 55% percent of the popular vote but holds only 57 of the 128 seats in parliament, he underscores the Shia belief that the current political structure is illegitimate.

NO SIDE CAN BE EXCLUDED

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¶17. (C) Lebanon's current political system and confessional balance do not permit excluding any one group from power. Since Hizballah dominates the Shia community and is at present capable of snuffing out challengers, any cabinet that excludes Hizballah or its Shia proxies is judged illegitimate by that community. (The other Shia party, Amal, which controls 13 deputies in the parliament to Hizballah's 12, is widely considered to be a facade that Hizballah uses as an interface with the outside world.)

¶18. (C) It is not only the Shia who are dominated by one party. The majority of Sunnis, led by Hariri, are unified in the Future Movement, and the majority of Druze follow Walid Jumblatt and his Progressive Socialist Party. Thus, political dialog is frequently filtered through a confessional dialectic. Each community's domestic policy is also linked to the foreign policy of its foreign patrons -- whether it be the Saudis for the Sunnis or the Iranians and the Syrians for the Shia -- and regional tensions are thus reflected domestically. Only the Christians are significantly divided and weakened by their political split. With such a stark political polarization reinforced by sectarian unity, no group can meet the confessional demands of the constitutional system without taking into consideration the demands of its political opponents, especially if they are armed.

¶19. (C) The government deadlock since Syria's exit in 2005, though marked by strategic overtones and continued Syrian interference, can also be read as a lesson in why excluding one confession is impossible in the Lebanese system. After Syria ceased its role as policeman/referee in Lebanon, the confessions and parties never reached consensus on the rules of the game and have manipulated the constitutional system by refusing to participate when it suits their goals. When their call for a unity government and early elections was rejected in late 2006, the Shia ministers left the cabinet and launched a sit-in in Beirut that paralyzed the capital for over a year. During the same period, Amal head and parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri refused to convene the parliament to vote on cabinet decisions taken by a cabinet that contained no Shia. The crisis ended only after the Doha Agreement offered the minority parties a temporary veto over all key government decisions. Even though the resulting national unity government was unable to address controversial issues, basic government business returned to normal.

OPPOSITION AIMS TO  
AMEND THE CONSTITUTION  
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¶10. (C) In the wake of Hariri's first attempt to form a cabinet, opposition figures have told us that they have made a strategic decision to link cabinet formation to "restructuring" the political system. The Lebanese political reality has long been a hybrid of written constitution and unwritten agreements between sects on the distribution of power. The opposition is seeking to make a one-time concession -- the blocking veto granted it at Doha that was good only until the elections -- a permanent fact. The demand of a veto, although it undermines the current Sunni-led majority, would not necessarily benefit only the Shia. The precedent, should it become a de facto constitutional coda, would theoretically allow any one of the three primary confessions to block any act it opposes.

POWER IS REDISTRIBUTED  
ONLY AFTER CONFLICT  
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¶11. (C) While most of our March 14 interlocutors admit the faulty nature of the current system, they reject opening Pandora's box by renegotiating it. The establishment of a secular system might seem the logical solution to an outsider, but Lebanon's already beleaguered Christians consider their 50% share in the parliament to be the

guarantee of their continued freedom and existence. Sunnis, the bedrock of the majority March 14 coalition, see no reason to weaken their powerful representative, the prime minister. Both sects vehemently oppose offering a veto to an armed Hizballah that imposes its will through its weapons and that has sworn allegiance to the Iranian regime.

#### COMMENT

¶12. (C) As the second round of cabinet-formation negotiations begins, we expect domestic players to alternate between blaming outside forces for meddling and calling on them to meddle to break the deadlock. While the March 14 majority underscores its constitutional prerogatives and the March 8 opposition relies on obstruction and threats of violence to achieve its goals, many Lebanese expect they will continue to live for some time with a caretaker government.

¶13. (C) Throughout Lebanon's history, power has only been redistributed, even temporarily, following violent shocks to the system. The 1969 Cairo Agreement, the 1989 Ta'if Accord, the 2005 exit of Syria from Lebanon, and the 2008 Doha Agreement -- all of which realigned the balance of power in Lebanon -- came only after armed strife or mass protests. Most of our interlocutors note that concessions to the opposition -- even painful ones -- may well be the only path to maintaining stability. Few expect that whatever government exits the ongoing cabinet formation process will be capable of taking strategic decisions contrary to the interests of Hizballah. In the meantime, the Lebanese government will be unable to take any non-consensual decisions on sensitive matters, such as security, as long as the political system remains unbalanced.

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